

06/25/21 Friday

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Afghan President Ghani Says Region Should 'Bet' on Government Amid Taliban Offensive
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US is preparing to evacuate up to 25,000 collaborators as it withdraws from Afghanistan, including interpreters, drivers, security guards, and clerks, among others, over fears they will be targeted for working with an occupation that has killed tens of thousands over the past two decades.

Speaking in Washington, DC, on Friday, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said he has not asked US President Joe Biden to delay the pullout of US troops despite a renewed Taliban offensive, and that other nations should "bet" on his government in Kabul and not the rebels.

Ghani traveled to the US with Abdullah Abdullah, chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation, on Friday to meet with senior US officials ahead of the final withdrawal of the main US force in Afghanistan in the next two weeks.

"The false narrative of abandonment is just false," Ghani told reporters. He later noted that he did not ask the American president to delay the pullout of US troops, and said he respects the decision. However, he acknowledged it would have an enormous impact on the region.

"President Biden's decision is a transformational decision that is going to have consequential results both for the people of Afghanistan and for the people of the United States in the region," Ghani said.

"The partnership between the United States and Afghanistan is not ending," Biden said. "Our troops may be leaving, but support for Afghanistan is not ending."

On Thursday, the [Associated Press reported](#) that about 650 US troops would remain behind for security purposes at the US embassy and Kabul airport until as late as September, but that the rest of the remaining 2,500-strong US force would be out of the Central Asian country by July 4, citing an anonymous administration source.

The withdrawal is part of a deal engineered in February 2020 with the Taliban, an Islamist militant group that ruled Afghanistan for several years until be overthrown by the US invasion in October 2001, at which time it returned to irregular warfare against the US and the new US-backed Afghan government. However, almost 20 years later, the US and its allies have failed to destroy the Taliban, which controls much of the countryside outside of a handful of large cities like Kabul and Herat.

The ceasefire is just between the Taliban and the US, though: no parallel deal with the Kabul government of Ghani has yet been reached.

Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad [Haneef Atmar told](#) the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday that Ghani had negotiated with the Taliban "in good faith," but "for almost 10 months now we have had no serious engagement from the Taliban for serious peace negotiation and no response to our proposed peace plan and absolutely no counter proposals."

Since the passing of the initially-agreed US pullout date of May 1, the Taliban has mounted a new offensive across several northern districts, capturing towns and entering the major cities of Kunduz and Maimana, the [New York Times](#) reported on Monday.

UN special envoy to Afghanistan Deborah Lyons told the Security Council on Tuesday that more than 50 of Afghanistan's 370 districts had been captured by the Taliban since then.

"Those districts that have been taken surround provincial capitals, suggesting that the Taliban are positioning themselves to try and take these capitals once foreign forces are fully withdrawn," Lyons said.

However, parallel to the US pullout, the Afghan security forces have seen a wave of new recruits joining up to fight back against the Taliban advance, according to the [Washington Post](#).

"Everyone has a stake in the system now," a security adviser to Ghani told the Post on Friday.

"Even our strongest critics have enjoyed the freedoms that came with civilian rule. Nobody wants things to go backwards. Our forces can't be in every village, and we are counting on the people to help. They are not trying to grab power, they are defending the system."

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Pentagon UFO Report Finds US Can't Explain 143 'Unidentified Aerial Phenomena' Incidents Since 2004

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to a much-anticipated interim report released Friday by a Pentagon task force on unidentified flying objects (UFOs), 143 of 144 reports since 2004 remain beyond the US government's explanation - and extraterrestrials haven't been ruled out as a potential origin. Titled "[Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena](#)," the nine-page report published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) is intended to provide Congress with a glimpse of how the government would handle a fuller report on what it knows about UFOs - or UAPs, as the Pentagon and Intelligence Community have preferred to call them.

While the report fails to provide adequate natural explanations for 144 of the reported incidents, they also don't conclude the phenomena must be aliens visiting us from another world, either. However, that explanation is one among several possibilities not yet dismissed. Other possibilities include atmospheric phenomena, airborne clutter, and "developments and classified programs by US entities."

According to the report, 18 incidents described in 21 reports - there are 80 reports with multiple observers - seem to demonstrate technological capabilities totally unknown to American Earthlings, such as objects moving without observable propulsion or accelerating and decelerating faster than any known craft can.

However, some analysts noted that among the potential explanations for the UFO/UAP incidents are unknown technologies being deployed by China, Russia, or other actors, which is sure to catch the eye of policymakers due to their potential to become fuel for ramping up military competition with those nations.

That's the conclusion [The War Zone arrived at](#) in April 2021, calling it "a big pill to swallow." Editor Tyler Rogoway fumed that "the US military seems aloof to the fact that it's being toyed with by a terrestrial adversary and key capabilities may be compromised as a result," pointing to a long history of experimental craft, from spy planes to drones, being passed off as UAPs. "We have no clear indications that there is any non-terrestrial explanation for them - but we will go wherever the data takes us," a senior US government official [told NBC News](#). "We do not have any data that indicates that any of these unidentified air phenomena are part of a foreign collection program nor do we have any data that is indicative of a major technological advancement by a potential adversary."

UFO reports have fascinated the American public for decades - and the military. From 1947 until 1969, the US Air Force's "Project Blue Book" and other programs tracked UFO reports and attempted to explain them. By the time they closed shop, they had collected more than 12,000 reports, of which 700 defied explanation. Still, the USAF maintained it had no evidence any were caused by extraterrestrials.

In 2020, the Pentagon turned heads when it published three videos already leaked to the public that had been recorded by US Navy pilots as they interacted with UFOs that moved in seemingly impossible ways. "The aerial phenomena observed in the videos remain characterized as 'unidentified'," the [Defense Department noted](#).

The US isn't the only nation on the trail of mysterious flying objects tracked and encountered by its military and citizenry. The [South China Morning Post](#) reported earlier this month that Beijing's UFO task force is "overwhelmed" with reports. Calling them "unidentified air conditions," the People's Liberation Army similarly believes them to be more likely to be man-made than alien-made.

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Video: Barstool's Portnoy Gets Called 'A Little B*tch' on Fox Business Amid 'Meme Stocks' Dispute
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Barstool Sports landed in some rough waters with the National Labor Relations Board in March after founder David Portnoy tweeted out a threat to fire any employees who attempted to contact a union organizer "on the spot" and his company started a fake union Twitter account to out labor organizers.

Things are going pretty wrong if you get dissed on national television. For Barstool Sports blog founder Portnoy, things went pretty wrong on Thursday afternoon.

It all started with the Gamestop short earlier this year. After Wall Street hedge fund managers bet heavily that the video game shop's stock value would fall, a group of online amateur investors got together on the Reddit community "WallStreetBets" to [coordinate a buying spree](#) that inflated GameStop's price to dozens of times its previous value, making fortunes for themselves and causing the professionals to lose billions.

One of the most visible and vocal supporters was Portnoy, who regularly livestreams himself trading stocks and notes in his Twitter bio he's "not a financial advisor. Don't trust anything I say about stocks." On February 2, he tweeted out: "I have officially sold all my meme stocks. I lost 700k ish. Vlad and company stole it from me and should be in jail," he said, referring to Vlad Tenev, the CEO of stock trading app Robinhood, which infuriated thousands after blocking them from trading certain stocks, including GameStop.

[GameStop data](#) shows that on that day, the stock's value crashed from a closing price of \$225 the day prior to closing at just \$90.

Fast forward to Thursday: Portnoy joined Fox Business Network "Making Money" host Charles Payne to talk about the phenomenon, which has continued despite his own bailout, and the role he played in drawing amateur [buyers into "stonks."](#)

"So many people in this got drawn into it because of you," Payne said. "They're so disappointed and angry at you, what do you say to them?"

"Those people are idiots," Portnoy replied, dismissing the notion that any of them could lose significant amounts of money. "We don't pay any attention to those morons ... The real people who have money in it, they're not the ones calling names."

"That's kind of cold ... Now you're saying these same folks that looked up to you, that jumped on the stonks bandwagon, now you're calling them names, now you're dissing them, belittling them?" Payne said, noting that to many he seemed a hypocrite because he preached holding onto the stocks no matter what to keep their value up and then "at the first sign of danger, you were the one who blinked."

"They closed trading Charles! I didn't know they could do that!" Portnoy thundered, referring to Robinhood blocking users from buying or selling Gamestop stocks amid the trading rush.

But wait, dear reader: it gets worse.

Payne pushed Portnoy to apologize to his followers, but the Barstool founder yelled back "you're making no sense, you're being a moron!"

"No I'm not being a moron, you're being a little b*tch!" Payne replied. "Listen, would you step up for these people, go to Gary Ginsler, and help change the rules?"

"Who is Gary Ginsler?" Portnoy asks.

After a long and dramatic pause, Payne delivers the smack down before ending the interview: "He's the chairman of the SEC."

Afterwards, Portnoy took to Twitter for a Parthian shot.

"We have to do it again soon, Dave," [Payne replied](#).

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FBI Feared Pennsylvania Would Seize Long-Lost Civil War Gold Cache if Told About It - Report by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A number of huge gold caches are rumored to still be awaiting discovery in North America, including infamous 17-century pirate Blackbeard's loot, garnered from years of raiding Spanish treasure ships in the Caribbean and modern US coast.

When the FBI believed in 2018 it had found the location of a lost stash of gold dating to the US Civil War, it applied for a federal warrant instead of telling the Pennsylvania state government, because it feared the state would seize the gold for itself, court documents obtained by [the Associated Press](#) have revealed.

The news agency reported on Friday that it had obtained the document in conjunction with the Philadelphia Inquirer after a federal judge unsealed the case for them. The dossier revealed a bizarre rivalry between federal and state governments and even some potential opportunists trying to purloin the bullion for themselves.

"I have probable cause to believe that a significant cache of gold is secreted in the underground cave," Jacob Archer, a member of the FBI art crime team in Philadelphia, wrote in the affidavit. According to the story relayed in the document, a huge amount of gold was hijacked by Confederate sympathizers in 1863 while on its way to the US Mint in Philadelphia. Mint records from the era haven't survived, so there's no verification any gold shipment ever went missing, but if it did exist it would be [worth millions](#) of dollars today.

However, as he goes on to explain, Archer felt he had to circumvent the more typical ways of going about getting permission to look for the gold because it was on state land, [the Inquirer notes](#).

"I am concerned that, even if DCNR gave initial consent for the FBI to excavate the cache of gold secreted at the Dent's Run Site, that consent could be revoked before the FBI recovered the United States property, with the result of DCNR unlawfully claiming that that cache of gold is abandoned property and, thus, belongs to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," Archer wrote, referring to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Based on reports by some treasure hunters on the trail of the gold, the FBI hired a contractor to examine a likely site in Elk County with some powerful equipment and found evidence of a massive buried object up to nine tons. If it were gold bullion, that would be roughly 667 gold bars.

It wasn't just the state government in Harrisburg that was after the gold, either: in 2013, a government staffer had learned of the gold site from some treasure hunters and offered to get them a digging permit in exchange for a cut of the treasure, according to Archer. No trace of that story could be found, either, though.

However, the weird story doesn't end there: according to the treasure hunters, the FBI lied to the US attorney's office in Philadelphia when it said the dig site turned up empty. They believe the FBI did find the gold and secretly whisked it away in a convoy of armored cars by cover of night, as locals reported seeing and hearing.

Dennis Parada, co-founder of Finders Keepers, told the AP that the FBI's claim is "insulting all the credible people who did this kind of work. It was a slap in the face, really, to think all these people could make that kind of mistake."

"They had 50 agents there...We have witnesses that they were there all night with armored cars. So, what are we supposed to believe?" journalist William Cluck, who was consulted by the FBI about Civil War history during their investigation, told Harrisburg's Patriot-News [daily in January](#). "We are convinced that they found gold."

However, other experts are less credulous.

"There was a tremendous amount of gold that went missing during the Civil War," William Rawlings, a historian who has researched similar rumors about lost Confederate gold, silver, and other riches and rarities, [told CNN](#) in 2018, amid the digging project in Elk County. "Most of these turn out to be nothing," he said, adding: "It's human nature. We all want to believe that some fantasy is true. And people love a mystery."

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Chauvin Sentenced to 22.5 Years Behind Bars Over 2020 Killing of George Floyd
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Derek Chauvin, previously with the Minneapolis Police Department, was convicted of second-degree murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in April for the in-custody death of local man George Floyd. The May 2020 incident prompted nationwide protests after video showed Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for over 9 minutes. A Minnesota courtroom sentenced Derek Chauvin to 22.5 years in prison on Friday, more than a year after the disgraced officer was filmed kneeling on Floyd's neck despite him repeatedly relaying that he was unable to breathe. Judge Peter Cahill told the court that Chauvin would be sentenced to approximately 270 months behind bars, a sentencing that amounts to 22.5 years. Chauvin will be receiving credit for the 199 days he has already spent in custody. "This [determination] is based on your abuse of a position of trust and authority, and also of particular cruelty shown to George Floyd," Cahill stated during the proceedings, adding that Chauvin is prohibited from possessing firearms, ammunition or explosives "for the remainder" of his life. Chauvin is also required to register as a predatory offender under state laws. The judge kept his courtroom remarks brief, instead opting to provide a more detailed analysis of the sentencing decision in a [22-page memorandum](#), which states that evidence clearly shows Chauvin taunted Floyd by responding "dismissively" to his pleas while lying facedown on the ground, and that he disregarded calls from fellow officers to roll Floyd into a "recovery position." Following the development, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison told reporters that "today's sentencing is not justice, but it is another moment of real accountability on the road to justice." During the earlier proceedings, victim statements were given by Floyd's daughter Gianna, his nephew Brandon Williams and his brothers Philonise and Terrence Floyd.

"Derek Chauvin had no regard for human life, George's life," Philonise Floyd told the courtroom, urging Cahill to decide against providing Chauvin the possibility of being released on parole or for good behavior.

"Please help us find closure."

As expected, Chauvin did not offer a full statement to the court over ongoing legal matters, but did offer his condolences to the Floyd family. Chauvin further indicated during his brief stay at

the lectern that additional details would be made available soon that would offer them “some peace of mind.”

Prior to the decision, Cahill previously ruled that since the murder case involved four aggravating factors, the circumstances would effectively pave the way for the presiding judge to double the state’s 15-year sentencing guideline.

It’s worth noting that while Chauvin’s second-degree murder charge does carry a maximum sentence of 40 years, it was widely speculated that it would be unlikely he would receive such a term, as the former officer had no previous felony arrests.

New Trial Motion Denied as Federal Civil Rights Case Looms

The ruling came down hours after Cahill denied an attempt by Chauvin’s lawyers for a new trial, explaining in a two-page order that legal representatives “failed to demonstrate” how the court deprived Chauvin of his right to a fair trial or engaged in prosecutorial misconduct, among other offenses alleged in a previously-filed motion.

The new trial effort came nearly a month after Chauvin was convicted in April by a jury in the state’s Hennepin County. Chauvin, who pleaded not guilty to all charges at the time, has remained in solitary confinement for the past two months.

However, despite the much-anticipated Friday sentencing, the day’s events do not signify the end of this particular case. Chauvin, along with three other officers who were involved in the fatal arrest, are still facing federal charges that allege the quartet violated Floyd’s civil rights. If convicted on the federal charge, Chauvin would serve the sentence concurrently to the state’s terms.

Trials for Tou Thao, J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane - the three other officers in the Floyd case - are scheduled to be held in March 2022. Cahill opted to postpone the officers’ trial until the following year in order to put distance with the publicity surrounding Chauvin’s trial.

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US Justice Department Files Suit Against Georgia Over New Voting Restrictions
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

After the 2020 US election and the 2021 Georgia runoff election prompted several GOP losses, including those that gave way to Democrats controlling the US Senate, Republican lawmakers took steps to tighten voting requirements within the nation, efforts that critics have stated serve to hinder voting access to minority communities.

The US Department of Justice has filed a lawsuit against Georgia over allegations that its recently passed election law violates protections afforded to minority voters under the Voting Rights Act, US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced on Friday.

The lawsuit specifically states that Georgia’s new voting legislation, otherwise known as [SB 202](#), violated [Section 2](#) of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits voting practices that discriminate on the basis of one’s race, color or minority community.

Garland declared during a [Friday conference](#) that Georgia's new election law was wholly enacted with the "purpose of denying or abridging the right of Black Georgians to vote on account of their race or color."

"This lawsuit is the first of many steps we are taking to ensure that all eligible voters can cast a vote, that all lawful votes are counted and that every voter has access to accurate information," Garland said, before calling on Congress to give the department additional tools to ensure voting rights are protected.

The 98-page legislation signed into law by Gov. Brian Kemp (R-GA) in late March offered a bevy of restrictions regarding voting practices and procedures, many of which imposed strict adjustments to the state's usage of absentee ballots.

In fact, the passage of SB 202 will give voters a smaller window to submit a request for absentee ballots while also enforcing stricter requirements for approved identification. It will also be illegal for election officials to automatically mail out absentee ballot applications to voters. And that's not all, folks, not by a long shot. Other hurdles outlined in SB 202 include misdemeanor charges for individuals who are seen offering food or water to voters waiting in line, as well as a ban on mobile voting centers unless a state of emergency is declared by the governor.

While Georgia lawmakers have repeatedly stated that the new initiative is meant to ensure election integrity, the new restrictions have raised red flags as they appear to purposely hinder outreach efforts by community activists.

Long voting lines in Georgia are not uncommon, especially in more densely populated communities that have a history of voting in favor of Democratic candidates. Various studies, including one conducted by the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), have determined that voters often opt to not vote in state or national elections over problems stemming from their polling places, such as having to wait for an extended period of time in a line.

The Republican governor further accused the administration of using the DoJ "to carry out their far-left agenda that undermines election integrity and emperors federal government overreach in our democracy."

Incidentally, the lawsuit comes amid the eight-year anniversary of the US Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in the Shelby County v. Holder case, which effectively invalidated Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. Garland remarked during the conference that if Georgia was still under the jurisdiction of Section 5, "it is likely that SN 202 would never have taken effect."

And yet, Georgia isn't the only state going forward with new, restrictive voting measures. Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL) signed into law a [similar legislation](#) in May as other state legislatures have taken up their own initiatives.

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State Dept: US Has Not Changed Stance on Recognizing Israeli Sovereignty Over Golan Heights

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, unconfirmed reports surfaced detailing that the Biden administration was intending to reverse a Trump-era decision to recognize the Golan Heights as under Israeli sovereignty. The claims surfaced from a Washington Free Beacon article published on Thursday that was widely picked up by mainstream news outlets.

The US Department of State reiterated on Friday that the Biden administration has no intention to reverse its stance that Israel holds sovereignty over the Golan Heights, underscoring that any reports saying otherwise are false.

The declaration came less than 24 hours after a [report](#) published by the Washington Free Beacon indicated that the US was on the verge of rescinding recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the region. The US government granted its recognition in 2019, under the Trump administration.

The agency's Near Eastern Affairs Department took to [social media](#) to set the record straight, tweeting "US policy regarding the Golan has not changed, and reports to the contrary are false." Israel took control of the Golan Heights from Syria during the Six Day War in 1967, later annexing the stretch of land in 1981. While much of the international community has refused to recognize Israel's claim on the region, the US serves as the only country to offer its support. Within hours of the Beacon report, Israeli cabinet ministers sounded the alarm, with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid [stating](#) that such "rumors" are meant to undermine Israel and "cause real damage" to the state.

The Thursday report was based on February remarks from US State Secretary Antony Blinken, who indicated at the time that the Golan Heights are "very important to Israel's security," and that it should hold onto control of the area, so long as Syrian President Bashar al Assad remains in power.

However, it also highlighted Blinken's statement that the US stance could shift "if the situation were to change in Syria." It's worth noting that the secretary of state did underscore that the US was "nowhere near" that option.

To date, the Biden administration has mostly refrained from promising whether it will be maintaining its current stance on the Golan Heights in the future.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US ambassador to the United Nations, informed congressional lawmakers during a [recent hearing](#) before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the matter of the Golan Heights remains unchanged, but that it is "an issue that the administration is still working on."

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Germany Bans Hamas Flag, PKK Symbols After Wave of Anti-Semitic Incidents
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier reports had previously revealed that German officials intended to implement a ban on the Hamas flag, which represents the Palestinian military group, in order to send a "clear message" to Jewish citizens that anti-Semitic attacks would not be tolerated amid a spike in violent incidents.

Lawmakers with the lower house of Germany's Bundestag passed a piece of legislation on Friday that effectively bans the flag representing the Hamas militant group, a move that came in response to a wave of anti-Semitic attacks in the country during the height of the Gaza conflict in May.

The newly-passed measure specifically outlaws symbols that have been designated as terrorist organizations by the European Union. The legislation also bans any symbols that identify the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has been designated a terrorist group by Turkey and allies. A proposal for the ban was initially [put forward](#) by Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, with deputy parliamentary spokesperson Thorsten Frei telling reporters that officials have no interest in having "flags of terrorist organizations [being] waved on German soil."

Prior to the Friday passage, only symbols of organizations banned in Germany had been barred.

For the duration of [11-day exchanges](#) between Israeli and Hamas troops in May, reports stated that many synagogues were attacked, and that Israeli flags had been burned by protesters outraged over the Israeli state's heavy-handed strikes against the Gaza Strip.

The legislation must still be cleared by the upper house of the German parliament. It's unclear when the body will take up the measure.

Germany took up similar efforts in [April 2020](#), when officials indicated they would ban any public symbols in support of Hezbollah.

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Jordan Gets \$290Mln in Emergency COVID-19 Funding for Poor, Workers - World Bank

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The World Bank said on Monday it has approved \$290 million in additional funding for Jordan to alleviate lingering economic difficulties among poor households and workers in the Middle Eastern country impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. The "US\$290 million for the Emergency Cash Transfer COVID-19 Response Project (is) to provide cash support to poor and vulnerable households and workers affected by the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Jordan," the World Bank said in a statement.

The financing was part of a recent allocation of \$1.1 billion secured by the World Bank and its international partners from a combination of loans and grants to support Jordan's response to the pandemic.

The new financing will scale up cash transfers to poor and near-poor households affected by the pandemic and provide wage subsidies for workers in some of the most affected firms, the World Bank said.

Although Jordan's economy is beginning to recover, the shock caused by the pandemic continued to be felt through job losses and reduced earnings, it added.

"Households relying on informal work have been the most affected, with many of them pushed into poverty," the World Bank said. "Some workers in the formal sector have suffered wage cuts while others have stopped being paid altogether as the companies they worked for close down."

The World Bank has committed over \$125 billion to combat the health, economic, and social impacts of the COVID-19 and help more than 100 countries strengthen their pandemic preparedness, protect jobs and the poor, and jumpstart financially inclusive and climate-friendly economic recoveries.

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RPT - Russian Actress Flew Around World to Work With Bruce Willis Despite Pandemic

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Russian actress Natali Yura told Sputnik she was so excited to get an opportunity to film with Hollywood superstar Bruce Willis that she took the risk of traveling around the globe from South Korea to the United States despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

"When I found out that I am going to be in this movie, I was auditioning in Korea for another project. For me it was an experience, because I have up to travel around the world in COVID time. I flew from [South] Korea to Moscow, from Moscow to Florida and then to Puerto Rico," Yura said on Friday.

Yura and Willis are starring in the movie Fortress 2, the second installment in the trilogy, which is currently filming in Puerto Rico. The first two of three parts of the series will be released in May 2022.

The actress noted that she was a little bit exhausted from all this traveling, but very happy, despite all of these difficulties.

"I was very excited to work with Bruce Willis. I really wanted to see the way he works and his approach, what is there that makes him Bruce Willis," she said.

Willis' character, a former CIA officer, is picking a fight with a billionaire-terrorist afflicted by revenge. He liberated several people, including Yura's heroine - Sasha Balzary - this malefactor's wife.

"Sasha - my character's name - is exhausted. She is the most dramatic character in the whole movie," Yura said.

Fortress 2 marks the second time Yura worked with Willis, but the first one - Reprisal in 2018 - was a very different story, she said.

"Even though we worked on the same project, we did not have any scenes together," the actress said. "In Fortress 2 his character is very important for my character. We work a lot, we had very emotional scenes together."

Yura confessed that she was a bit nervous at first especially considering Willis' movies were her favorite as a child.

However, all fears disappeared very quickly, she added.

"I was amazed how easy for me it was to work with him," Yura said. "He is very technical, he is very experienced, but he has so much empathy that you get connected to him right away."

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Russian Actress Flew Around World to Work With Bruce Willis Despite Pandemic

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UPDATE - Ghani Says Did Not Ask Biden to Delay US Exit From Afghanistan, But Warns of Consequences

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Afghan President Ashraf Ghani told reporters that he did not ask US President Joe Biden during their meeting to delay the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, but warned that the move will have consequences for both sides.

"President Biden's decision is a transformational decision that is going to have consequential results both for the people of Afghanistan and for the people of the United States in the region," Ghani said during remarks in Washington on Friday.

Ghani said discussions with the United States have been very productive and countries in the region should "bet" on the Afghan government to remain in power, not on other forces. Biden made clear that the United States will continue to provide security and humanitarian assistance to Afghans, Ghani said.

The Afghan president's comments come during escalating violence and recent advances by the Taliban, which had won key territory and appeared to be encircling Kabul in recent weeks. Kabul has long accused Pakistan of harboring and supporting the Taliban, so it is reasonable to believe his comments on placing bets were aimed at Islamabad.

Moreover, he announced that Afghan security forces took back a number of districts that had fallen to the Taliban in southern and northern Afghanistan. Ghani called on the Taliban for a ceasefire and to return to the political process.

The Afghan government needs to manage the consequences that will emerge after the US withdrawal and the Afghan people must rise to the challenge, Ghani said.

The Afghan delegation met with a bipartisan group of lawmakers from Congress and there was a unified consensus that they would support Afghanistan, Ghani said.

Biden, in his remarks, said the United States would not abandon Afghanistan but did say the Afghan people have to decide their own future.

"Our troops may be leaving but our support for Afghanistan is not ending in terms of support and maintenance of helping maintain their military as well as economic and political support," Biden told reporters as he met with Ghani.

Ghani tried to play to American heartstrings by invoking the US Civil War.

"The Afghan nation is in 1861 moment, like President [Abraham] Lincoln, rallying to the defense of the republic, determined that the republic is defended. It's a choice of values -- the values of an exclusionary system or an inclusionary system," Ghani said alongside Biden on Friday.

"We're determined to have unity, coherence, national sense of sacrifice, and will not spare anything."

Ghani also said he wanted to pay tribute to the 2,448 Americans who paid the "ultimate sacrifice," and over a million veterans who served with honor and dignity.

"The United States has not spared any effort in blood or treasure during these years," Ghani said. "And as a grateful nation, I want to acknowledge that and ask you... to thank the Gold Star families."

Biden and Ghani met at the White House as US troops are leaving Afghanistan after over two decades of military operations there. The United States has already withdrawn more than half of its troops from Afghanistan and expects to largely complete by July, well ahead of the September 11 deadline.

The withdrawal is taking place amid uncertainty and increased violence in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, reports emerged claiming the US intelligence community estimates that the government of Afghanistan could collapse six months after the complete withdrawal of US

forces. The US intelligence reportedly revised their initial, more optimistic estimates after the Taliban opposition movement seized dozens of localities in northern Afghanistan

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Floyd's Attorney Calls on US Senate to Pass Police Reform Bill After Chauvin Sentencing

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Civil rights attorney Ben Crump called on the US Senate to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act following the sentencing of the former police officer convicted of his murder.

Earlier, a US court sentenced former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin to 22.5 years in prison for the murder of the Floyd. The 46-year-old Black man was killed in police custody after Chauvin kneeling on his neck for around 9 minutes.

"We need accountability on the policy level, so we say to the United States Senate: pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act immediately," Crump said Friday.

The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, sponsored by Representative Karen Bass, is intended to address a wide range of policing policies and issues. The bill would lower the criminal intent standard to convict police officers of misconduct, limit qualified immunity in private civil actions against officers, and grant the Justice Department subpoena power in pattern-or-practice investigations.

The legislation, which passed the House in March of this year, is awaiting approval in the Senate. Biden has called on Democrats and Republicans to come together and find common ground on the legislation and police reform.

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Ghani Says Did Not Ask Biden to Delay US Exit From Afghanistan, But Warns of Consequences

WASHINGTON, June 26 (Sputnik) - Afghan President Ashraf Ghani told reporters that he did not ask US President Joe Biden during their meeting to delay the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, but warned that the move will have consequences for both sides.

"President Biden's decision is a transformational decision that is going to have consequential results both for the people of Afghanistan and for the people of the United States in the region," Ghani said during remarks in Washington on Friday.

Ghani said discussions with the United States have been very productive and countries in the region should "bet" on the Afghan government to remain in power, not on other forces. Biden made clear that the United States will continue to provide security and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, Ghani said.

Moreover, he announced that Afghan security forces took back a number of districts that had fallen to the Taliban in southern and northern Afghanistan. Ghani called on the Taliban for a ceasefire and to return to the political process.

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Senior US Official to Visit Paraguay, Panama, El Salvador Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, will travel to three countries in Latin America next week to hold meeting with officials and institutions on a range of issues, the State Department said.

"Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland will travel to Asuncion, Paraguay; Panama City, Panama; and San Salvador, El Salvador, June 27-June 30 with an interagency delegation to engage with senior leaders, government officials, and civil society throughout the region," the State Department said in a press release.

Nuland will be joined by Acting Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere Julie Chung, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere Daniel Erikson, National Security Council Director for Central America Megan Oates and US Southern Command Director of Policy and Plans Rick Uribe.

Nuland will meet with the presidents and foreign ministers of Paraguay and Panama, as well as the president of El Salvador, and will discuss regional democracy and security, climate change, migration and trade.

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"President Biden's decision is a transformational decision that is going to have consequential results both for the people of Afghanistan and for the people of the United States in the region," Ghani said during remarks in Washington on Friday.

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US Calls for Probe Into Killing of 3 Doctors Without Borders Staff in Tigray - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The United States expresses its sympathy for the three Doctors Without Borders staff killed in Ethiopia's Tigray region on Friday and is calling for an independent probe into the matter, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"We are appalled and deeply saddened to learn about the horrific killings of three Doctors Without Borders staff members in Ethiopia's Tigray region today. Attacks on humanitarian workers are indefensible and must end immediately. We call for an independent investigation and for the perpetrators to be held accountable for these killings," Price said on Friday.

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US Can Not Draw Conclusions on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Due to Limited Data - DNI

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The lack of high-quality information and reporting systems for unidentified aerial phenomena has prevented drawing clear conclusions about them, but they may pose a security threat for the United States, Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in an assessment.

"The limited amount of high-quality reporting on unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) hampers our ability to draw firm conclusions about the nature or intent of UAP," the assessment said on Friday. "UAP clearly pose a safety of flight issue and may pose a challenge to US national security."

The assessment, which provides policymakers with an overview of the challenges that come with characterizing UAPs and the risk they pose, was prepared for the US House and Senate Intelligence and Armed Services Committees.

The DNI said the assessment provides guidance on how consolidation of reports from across the government, standardized reporting, increased collection and analysis and a streamlined screening process would likely deepen understanding of the issue.

The DNI explained in the assessment that UAP incidents fall in one of five categories: airborne clutter, natural atmospheric phenomena, US government or industry developmental programs,

foreign adversary systems and the catch-all "other" designation that presumably include extraterrestrial life.

The UAPs could pose a risk to US national security in case it turns out it has to do with technology developed by foreign adversaries, the assessment said.

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IMF Board Discusses Proposal to Allocate \$650Bln for COVID-19 Crisis - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board discussed the largest Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) allocation in history, the IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said in a statement.

"Today the IMF Executive Board discussed a proposal for a new US\$650 billion SDR allocation - the largest issuance in the IMF's history aimed at helping its membership, especially the most vulnerable, overcome the COVID-19 crisis. The Board discussion is another step in the process toward a new SDR allocation which we expect to be completed by the end of August," Rice said.

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Russian Embassy Says Ready to Assist Compatriots Affected By Florida Building Collapse

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Russian Embassy in the United States has sent inquiries to the US State Department to determine whether there are any Russian nationals among the victims of the collapsed building near Miami, Florida, and stands ready to provide any needed assistance to affected compatriots, the Embassy said in a statement provided to Sputnik.

"Russian Embassy in the United States is closely monitoring situation amid the collapse of the multistory building in Surfside, Florida," the statement said on Friday. "The inquiries have been sent to the US Department of State on whether there are any Russian citizens among the victims. If necessary, we will provide our compatriots with consular assistance."

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Biden Says US Support for Afghanistan 'Not Ending,' Will Be Sustained

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with his Afghan counterpart Ashraf Ghani and said the United States' will not end its support for Afghanistan and will sustain it.

"The partnership between Afghanistan and the United States is not ending, it is going to be sustained. Support for Afghanistan is not ending," Biden said on Friday, referring to the US military, economic and political support for Kabul.

Afghans are going to have to decide their future based on what they want, Biden added.

The US president urged stopping what he called was a senseless violence in Afghanistan, but acknowledged that achieving that goal would be difficult.

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Biden Says Not Tuned to Specifics of Chauvin Decision, But Prison Sentence Appropriate

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he is not aware of the considerations that led to Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's 270-month sentence, but added that finds the punishment appropriate under existing laws.

Earlier on Friday, Judge Peter Cahill sentenced the 45-year-old former police officer to 22.5 years in prison for the murder of George Floyd during his arrest last year.

"I don't know all the circumstances that were considered but it seems to me, under the guidelines, that seems to be appropriate," Biden told reporters.

The prosecutors in the case had asked the judge for a sentence of 30 years in prison while the defense called for probation citing Chauvin's lack of criminal history.

In April, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's death.

The 46-year-old Floyd died last May after Chauvin knelt on his neck for about nine minutes. The incident, which was caught on video that went viral, sparked widespread protests - and riots - over police-involved killings of Blacks in the United States.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) -

US COURT SENTENCES DEREK CHAUVIN

* A US court sentenced former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin to 270 months in prison for the murder of George Floyd during his arrest last year.

* Chauvin declined the opportunity to give remarks at his sentencing hearing, citing other ongoing legal matters.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Friday that he had discussed at a meeting in the State Department the possibility of holding a US-Russia meeting on strategic stability in July.

- * Antonov said that Russia and the United States have conducted their first contacts on international cybersecurity issues.
- * Russian diplomats serving in the United States still face visa issues, Antonov said.
- * The United States sees an opportunity to work in partnership with Russia to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid to refugees in Syria, acting Assistant Secretary for Near East Asian Affairs in the US State Department Joey Hood said.
- * Moscow and Washington did not exchange lists of detained US and Russian citizens and there is no progress on the issue, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

ATTACK IN BAVARIA

- * At least three people were killed and six injured in a knife attack in the city of Wuerzburg in the German federal state of Bavaria, the Bild reported on Friday.

RUSSIA PUTS IN ORBIT NEW GENERATION SATELITE

- * Russia put into orbit a new-generation satellite after launching it on the Soyuz-2.1b rocket from the Plesetsk cosmodrome, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

BUILDING COLLAPSE IN FLORIDA

- * Four people have been found dead and 159 remain missing in the rubble of the apartment building that collapsed the previous day in the state of Florida, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levin Cava told reporters in an update on Friday morning.
- * US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he discussed the collapse of a 12-story apartment building in Miami-Dade County with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

ICAO INVESTIGATION OF RYANAIR INCIDENT

- * The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has not gotten full answers to the raised questions about the Ryanair airplane incident and is yet to the matter, Russian envoy to ICAO Sergey Gudkov told Sputnik.
- * ICAO has formed an investigative panel into the Ryanair incident and has determined and sent several countries the questions in this regard, Russia's representative to the organization told Sputnik.
- * Russia did not take part in preparing the preliminary report by the ICAO into the Ryanair airplane incident, Gudkov told Sputnik.

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Biden Names US State Dept. Special Envoy to Promote LGBTQI Rights Globally - White House

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has announced his appointment of a US Special Envoy to advance the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex persons (LGBT), the White House said on Friday.

"Today, ahead of his remarks at the White House for Pride Month, President Joe Biden announced that he will appoint Jessica Stern to be the US Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons at the Department of State," the White House said in a statement.

The White House described Stern's role as critical to ensuring that US diplomacy and US foreign assistance would be used to promote and protect the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons around the world.

"At a time when the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons are increasingly threatened in all regions of the world, the Special Envoy will bring together like-minded governments, civil society organizations, corporations and international organizations to uphold dignity and equality for all," the statement said.

The Special Envoy will play a vital role in leading the implementation of the Presidential Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons Around the World, the White House explained.

Stern previously served as Executive Director of OutRight Action International in New York where she supported the legal registration of LGBTQI organizations globally and helped secure the mandate of the United Nations Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

Stern also worked to expand the UN General Assembly resolution to include gender identity, and co-founded the UN LGBTI Core Group. She has provided expert opinions to governments globally, regional human rights institutions, and UN mechanisms, including UN Women where she serves as a member of multiple leadership bodies, the White House said.

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US Court Sentences Ex-Police Officer Chauvin to 22.5 Years in Prison for Floyd Murder

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - A US court sentenced former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin to 270 months in prison for the murder of George Floyd during his arrest last year.

"This [sentence] is based on your abuse of a position of trust and authority and also the particular cruelty shown to George Floyd," Judge Peter Cahill said moments before announcing the sentence.

In addition, Cahill said Chauvin is prohibited from possessing firearms, ammunition or explosives for the remainder of his life.

Cahill said he did not base his sentence on public opinion and it should not be seen as trying to convey some message. The judge also said he acknowledges the pain the Floyd family is feeling and noted the unrest that swept the United States in wake of Floyd's death.

Prosecutors had asked the judge for a sentence of 30 years in prison while the defense called for probation citing the lack of criminal history.

In April, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's death.

The 46-year-old Floyd died last May after Chauvin knelt on his neck for about nine minutes. The incident, which was caught on video that went viral, sparked widespread protests - and riots - over police-involved killings of Blacks in the United States.

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The 46-year-old Floyd was killed last May after Chauvin knelt on his neck for about nine minutes. The incident, which was caught on video that went viral, sparked widespread protests over police-involved killings of Blacks.

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US, EU, Canada Ready to Review Sanctions Policies Against Venezuela - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – The United States along with the European Union and Canada have expressed their willingness to lift sanctions against Venezuela amid “meaningful” progress in restoring national democratic institutions, three top diplomats said in a joint statement on Friday.

“We welcome substantive, credible advancements to restore core democratic processes and institutions in Venezuela and are willing to review sanctions policies based on meaningful progress in a comprehensive negotiation,” US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, and Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Marc Garneau said in their statement.

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Chauvin at Sentencing Hearing Declines to Give Remarks, Offers Condolences to Floyd Family

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin during his sentencing hearing over the murder of Black man George Floyd declined the opportunity to give remarks at his sentencing hearing, citing other ongoing legal matters.

"At this time due to some additional legal matters at hand I'm not able to give a full formal statement at this time... I want to give my condolences to the Floyd family," Chauvin said on Friday.

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Belgian Firm Pleads Guilty for Pentagon Contract Allocation Fraud – US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – A Belgian security company, G4S Security Solutions NV, has pleaded guilty to a fraud scheme of security services contracts allocation, including a multimillion-dollar deal with the US Department of Defense related to Belgium-based military bases and installations, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"G4S Secure Solutions NV (G4S), a Belgian security firm, has agreed to plead guilty for its role in a conspiracy to rig bids, allocate customers and fix prices for defense-related security services, including a multimillion-dollar contract issued in 2020 to provide security services to the U.S. Department of Defense for military bases and installations in Belgium," the Department said in a release. "This is the first international resolution obtained by the Procurement Collusion Strike Force (PCSF)."

It is alleged that between spring 2019 and summer 2020, the company and its co-conspirators committed fraud to allocate security services contracts for Belgian locations among themselves as well as to determine the prices as which contracts would be bid, including the one for Pentagon and the NATO Communications and Information Agency, the release said.

The company has agreed to pay a criminal fine of \$15 million on top of agreeing to plead guilty and cooperate with the United States during the ongoing investigation, according to the release.

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George Floyd's Brother Urges Maximum Sentence for Ex-Officer Chauvin

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - George Floyd's brother, Philonise Floyd, during former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's sentencing hearing on Friday urged the court to give him the maximum sentencing for the charges he has been found guilty for.

"I'm asking that you please find it suitable to give officer Chauvin the maximum sentence possible for the charge[s] that he has been found guilty for," Philonise Floyd said.

In April, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's death.

Prosecutors are asking judge Peter Cahill for a sentence of 30 years in prison while the defense is calling for a probation citing the lack of criminal history.

Floyd, a 46-year old Black man, was killed last May after Chauvin knelt on his neck for about nine minutes. Since the incident, some US states have enacted police reform measures, like choke-hold bans, while Congress is at loggerheads over a reform bill named after Floyd.

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US Defense Chief, Afghan President Discuss Transition to New Bilateral Ties - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in a meeting at the Pentagon, discussed the transition to a new relationship between the two countries as American forces near a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Pentagon said on Friday.

"President Ghani, Dr. Abdullah and Secretary Austin discussed the winding down of the Resolute Support Mission and with that the transition to a new relationship with Afghanistan and with the Afghan forces," the Pentagon said in a press release.

The two sides reiterated the importance of ensuring Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorists that threaten the United States and its allies, the release said.

Austin conveyed to Ghani that the United States is invested in preserving stability in Afghanistan and continuing US support to the Afghan security forces, the release said.

Earlier on Friday, Fox News reported that the US military executed two drone strikes against Taliban positions in northern Afghanistan hours after three more districts in the country fell to the Taliban. An unknown number of Taliban fighters were killed in the strikes in the provinces of Baghlan and Kunduz provinces, the report said.

Afghan national forces took back six other districts elsewhere in the country in the past 24 hours, according to local media.

The latest developments came as the United States nears a complete withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan in the coming weeks, well ahead of Biden's September 11 deadline.

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Canada in Contact with Int'l. Partners Over Heart Inflammation After COVID Jab - Official

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Canadian public health officials are in touch with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as well as other international health regulators regarding the cases of heart inflammation following immunization with coronavirus vaccines, Canada's chief medical officer Theresa Tam said on Friday.

"We've been following the situation very closely and linking with the CDC, our European counterparts, as well as Health Canada linking with other regulators, to monitor and understand the analysis on the [cases of] myocarditis, or inflammation of the heart," Tam said during a press briefing.

Canada is learning about the condition from international partners, including the United States and the United Kingdom, given the country's low vaccination numbers among young people, who are primarily affected by the condition, Tam said, noting that Ottawa is monitoring the domestic situation through its vaccine adverse effect reporting system (VAERS).

Tam, however, stressed that the individuals who reported the adverse effect had a mild reaction to the vaccines, and recommended individuals "take it easy" after vaccination, self-monitor for symptoms and contact a healthcare provider should they feel any discomfort.

On Wednesday, the CDC said that it continues to recommend coronavirus vaccinations for everyone 12 years of age and older, albeit with a new warning to watch for symptoms of an enlarged heart reported by a fraction of people receiving the Pfizer or Moderna inoculation.

The release urged vaccine recipients to "be on the lookout for any of the following symptoms: chest pain; shortness of breath; feelings of having a fast-beating, fluttering, or pounding heart" and to seek medical care if any of the symptoms occur following the first or second jab.

The US Food and Drug Administration is expected to add similar warnings accompanying both vaccines, according to media reports.

Tam added that the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and the National Advisory Committee on Immunizations will have more to say on the issue next week.

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Biden Says Spoke to Florida Governor on Building Collapse

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he discussed the collapse of a 12-story apartment building in Miami-Dade County with Governor of Florida Ron DeSantis.

"I have spoken with Governor DeSantis, and we provide all the help that they need," Biden told reporters.

FEMA is providing all needed assistance, he added.

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St. John of Shanghai Prayed Long Time at Church Altar on His Last Day - Witness

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - One of the most venerated saints of the Russian diaspora, Archbishop John of Shanghai and San Francisco, spent the last day of his life in extraordinarily long prayers, his spiritual son and witness to his death Patrick Bredin told Sputnik.

The Russian Orthodox Church will commemorate the 55th anniversary of Archbishop John's blissful depart on July 2. He died on that day in 1966 in Seattle, Washington, where he was visiting the St. Nicholas Orthodox cathedral with the wonder-working Kursk Root icon of the Mother of God.

Patrick Bredin, who was born in Malaysia and became Russian Orthodox after meeting with Archbishop John in China in 1938, had come to Seattle from Vancouver, Canada, to accompany the archbishop and the Holy icon.

"The last weekend of St. John's life, my very close friend and I were in Seattle to bring the archbishop to Vancouver with the wonder-working icon," Bredin said. "During that last day, I remember, he was doing a lot of praying in the altar after the Divine Liturgy."

After the archbishop's death, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) leadership ruled immediately to transfer his body to his home city of San Francisco for the funeral.

"There were a lot of conversations and discussions about how to get his body back to San Francisco," Bredin said.

He described St. John as one of the people he was closest to, someone who paid more attention to him even than his own father.

"It is hard to express the feelings I had when he passed away. It was very sad to me. He was the closest father I had in my life," Bredin said.

Archbishop John, whose secular name Mikhail Maksimovitch, was born in 1896 in the Russian Empire. He left in 1921 after the Bolshevik revolution together with his family and settled in Yugoslavia as did many Russian emigres at the time. He graduated from Belgrade University with a degree in theology and was tonsured a monk. In 1934, he was ordained a bishop of the ROCOR and assigned to the diocese of Shanghai.

Bredin came to Shanghai, where his father resided after his divorce, in 1938, as a 12-year-old boy. He was delivering milk in the city of Laoshan when he met St. John.

"The Archbishop asked me, would I like to be Orthodox? My step-mother was Russian, so I answered, yes, I do," Patrick recalled. "St. John told me: 'You can be baptized. Go this coming Sunday to the church in Laoshan.'"

Shortly thereafter, Patrick was baptized with the name of Andrew and, advised by Archbishop John, began studying in the Russian school.

"St. John took me under his wing. He absolutely loved all the children in our school. He taught me to become an altar boy," Bredin noted. "I even was able to come to his cabinet where he always worked and prayed. How can I ever forget that? Never in my life."

St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco was canonized by the ROCOR in 1994. His relics rest in the Cathedral of the Theotokos, Joy of All Who Sorrow in San Francisco.

Fourteen years later, in 2008, he was glorified by the Bishop's Council of the Russian Orthodox Church for all-church veneration.

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Biden to Continue Lead US Contrary to Rumors of Trump Takeover - White House

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is going to continue leading the United States despite rumors about a possible takeover by his predecessor Donald Trump, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The President is prepared to continue to govern and lead the United States of America and of course, should there be an elevation and escalation, that is something we would certainly monitor and track as well," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about rumors that Trump will be reinstated in the office in August.

The statement comes after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced on Thursday that the House will create a select committee to investigate the unrest at the Capitol on January 6, during which Trump supporters entered Congress to protest lawmakers confirming the 2020 election results from several states Trump claimed were fraudulent.

Trump will hold a rally in the state of Ohio on Saturday and in Florida on July 3 to garner support for Republican candidates and causes that further the agenda and accomplishments of the Trump administration.

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US Working to Repatriate 2,000 Foreign Fighters, 2,000 Iraqis From Syria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The US-led coalition is working to return some 2,000 terrorist fighters as well as 2,000 Iraqi nationals currently detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to face accountability in their countries of origin, the US State Department acting Director of the Office of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (banned in Russia) Patrick Worman said on Friday.

"The [US-led] coalition is working to ensure that 2000 foreign terrorist fighters and 2000 Iraqis in SDF custody are ultimately returned to their countries of origin and face accountability. US and coalition support to SDF detention is critical, but this should not be misunderstood to be the long-term solution. Repatriation, then prosecution or rehabilitation as appropriate, is the only long-term solution for the non-Syrians," Worman said in a briefing.

The US diplomat also said that a total of about 10,000 captured Islamic State (banned in Russia) fighters are currently in SDF makeshift detention facilities while tens of thousands of women and children are still in humanitarian camps and being subject to significant security issues.

In May, Syrian Democratic Council Representative in the United States and member of the Presidential Committee, Bassam Saker told Sputnik that the SDF still holds about 5,000 foreign terrorists in custody because no country wants to take them back.

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Biden to Continue Lead US Contrary to Rumors of Trump Takeover – White House

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden is going to continue leading the United States in spite of the rumors about a possible takeover by his predecessor Donald Trump, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The [US] President [Joe Biden] is prepared to continue to govern and lead the United States of America and of course, should there be an elevation and escalation, that is something we would certainly monitor and track as well," Psaki said in a briefing when asked about rumors that Trump will be reinstated in the office in August

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Harris Meets With Migrant Children During Border Visit, Inspects Port of Entry - Statement

EL PASO, June 25 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris met with migrant children during her visit to the US southern border and made an unannounced stop at a port of entry to inspect operations, her office said on Friday.

"While inside [Border Patrol facility], the VP [Vice President] met with 5 young girls ages 9-16, from Central America," Harris' office said in a statement. "They drew pictures for her and they told the VP what they wanted to be when they grow up."

Harris also made an unannounced visit to the Paso del Norte port of entry in El Paso, Texas, her office said. Harris toured an area for screening of asylum applicants as they enter from Mexico and inspected an outdoor vehicle inspection area used to screen vehicles crossing the border for illegal goods or activities, her office said.

Harris also met with local pro-immigration advocates, shelter and legal service providers, and faith-based non-governmental organizations to talk about their efforts to help migrants.

Harris is accompanied by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, US Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin and Congresswoman Veronica Escobar.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott criticized Harris for choosing to avoid the Rio Grande Valley and Del Rio sectors of the border where a vast majority of the migrants are entering the United States illegally to ask for asylum.

US Customs and Border Protection data revealed this month that the number of asylum-seeking migrants apprehended along the southern border with Mexico in May set another record, reaching a new 21-year monthly high of 180,034. A total of 929,868 migrants have been apprehended illegally crossing the US-Mexico since October, putting the Biden

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UN Special Envoy for Syria Says to Visit Moscow Soon for Talks With Russia, Iran, Turkey

UNITED NATIONS, June 25 (Sputnik) - United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen on Friday told the UN Security Council that he will soon travel to Moscow for talks with Russia, Iran and Turkey.

"I have been in regular contact with senior officials from the Russian Federation and the United States before and since the recent Geneva Summit. I have been in regular contact with many other members of this Council and key states in the region," Pedersen said. "From here, I will fly to Rome for consultations with foreign ministers participating in a Ministerial Meeting on Syria convened by Italy and the United States. I am hoping to be in Moscow soon, and to consult Turkey and Iran and as well - there will be an Astana format meeting in Nur Sultan in early July." Pedersen said he plans to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow. Speaking of discussions with Russia and other key players, Pedersen expressed hope that they will reach the desired goal and resolve the situation in Syria.

"My hope that through these discussions we will be able to enlight on what we agree on," he said.

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Biden to Call Florida Governor to Discuss Collapse of Apartment Building - White House

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will call Florida Governor Ron DeSantis today to discuss the collapse of a 12-story apartment building in Miami-Dade County, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We're working to set up a call between the President and the Governor, that should be happening this afternoon," Psaki told reporters.

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Canada in Contact with Int'l Partners Over Heart Inflammation After COVID Jab – Official

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Canadian public health officials are in touch with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as other international health regulators regarding the cases of heart inflammation following immunization with coronavirus vaccines, the country's chief medical officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, said on Friday.

"We've been following the situation very closely and linking with the CDC, our European counterparts, as well as Health Canada linking with other regulators, to monitor and understand the analysis on the [cases of] myocarditis, or inflammation of the heart," Tam said during a press briefing.

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Blinken to Discuss Global Tax, Economic Recovery, Climate Change at G20 - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his counterparts at a G20 meeting in Italy next week will discuss global tax reform, climate change and economic recovery from the pandemic, State Department Office of Monetary Affairs Director Susannah Cooper said on Friday.

"This engagement is an opportunity for the Secretary to encourage greater cooperation in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the climate crisis, advancing democracy and human rights, and building back better with global partners including the world's largest, advanced, and emerging economies in support of an inclusive and sustainable economic recovery," Cooper said.

Blinken will also encourage G20 member states to join efforts to adopt a new global tax rate, Cooper said.

The G20 ministerial meeting is scheduled to take place in Matera, Italy, on June 29.

Prior to the G20 ministerial, Blinken will attend meetings with global partners to discuss the conflict in Syria and the mission to defeat the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in Iraq and Syria.

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US House Votes to Get Rid of Trump Rule on Methane

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Democrat lawmakers in Congress aligned to President Joe Biden voted on Friday to get rid of his predecessor Donald Trump's liberal emission ruling on the methane greenhouse gas that they said was destructive to the environment.

"With today's vote to rescind Trump-era attacks on methane regulations, and with further action on climate, we can begin to repair the immense damage done by Donald Trump and recommit ourselves to science, health, and justice," Democratic Senator Ed Markey said via Twitter after the House of Representative voted 229-191 vote to repeal the methane bill.

Twelve House Republicans joined Democrats in their vote.

The Senate had voted earlier against Trump's methane rule and the bill now will head to the White House for Biden's signature and final repeal.

The Trump-era regulation rescinded standards aimed at limiting methane emissions from oil and gas production, processing, transmission and storage. The Trump rule also abolished limits for substances called volatile organic compounds from oil and gas transmission and storage.

By voting to be rid of the Trump rule, the lawmakers were effectively restoring 2016 Obama-era laws that required companies to capture methane leaks.

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US Launches 2 More Drone Strikes at Taliban Positions in North Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The US military carried out two drone strikes against Taliban positions in northern Afghanistan only hours after three more districts in the country were reported as being occupied the Taliban, US media reports said on Friday.

The strikes were made only a few hours before Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was scheduled to meet with President Joe Biden in Washington. An unknown number of Taliban fighters were killed in the strikes in the provinces of Baghlan and Kunduz provinces, Fox News cited a US defense official as saying.

Afghan national forces took back six other districts elsewhere in the country in the past 24 hours, according to local media.

The latest developments came as the United States prepared to evacuate most of its remaining forces from Afghanistan in the next few weeks, well ahead of Biden's September 11 deadline, the report said.

The Biden administration is also rushing to evacuate thousands of Afghan interpreters and their families, the report added.

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ICAO Council President Schedules Meeting on Ryanair Incident for Monday - Russia Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council President Salvatore Sciacchitano has scheduled an additional meeting for next Monday to address the preliminary report on the investigation into the Ryanair airplane incident, Russian envoy to ICAO Sergey Gudkov told Sputnik on Friday.

The meeting was previously expected to be held on Friday.

"The President of the Council, Mr Sciacchitano, took the decision and organized an additional meeting of the Council on Monday 28 June 2021, which will discuss the document on the incident with the aircraft of the Irish airline Ryanair," Gudkov said.

Earlier, Gudkov told Sputnik the working document presented to the ICAO outlined the state of affairs on the investigation of this incident including setting up an Investigative Commission. A range of questions were sent to a number of countries on the matter, he added.

Russia did not take part in preparing the preliminary report, Gudkov said.

In late May, a Ryanair airplane flying from Athens to Vilnius landed in Minsk over a bomb threat flagged by the Belarusian authorities that turned out to be false. The authorities detained passenger Roman Protasevich, whose Telegram channel Nexta is said to have played a crucial part during last year's post-election unrest and has been designated as being extremist.

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Fed's Inflation Gauge Keeps Rising While US Consumer Sentiment Dips - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) index, the key US inflation gauge monitored by the Federal Reserve, increased in May for a third month in a row while personal income and consumer sentiment fell that month, data from the Commerce Department revealed on Friday.

The core PCE index increased by 0.5 percent in May and 3.4 percent from a year ago, the data showed. By contrast, the Commerce Department's Personal Income index contracted by 2 percent in May while the Consumer Sentiment survey by the University of Michigan slipped to 83.5 from a previous 83.8 points.

The Federal Reserve has said the overshoot in inflation is due to price pressures arising from bottlenecks in US supply chains struggling to cope with demand in an economy reopening after months of coronavirus pandemic-suppression.

The University of Michigan said the survey indicates that US consumers were getting more wary of spending.

"It is likely that consumers will not reduce their savings and wealth to pre-pandemic levels, but maintain a higher level of precautionary funds," University of Michigan said in a report accompanying the survey.

The economy expanded by an annual rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of this year after shrinking 3.5 percent for all of 2020 due to coronavirus-related lockdowns. The Federal Reserve has officially forecast a 6.5 percent growth for all of 2021.

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The meeting was previously expected to be held on Saturday.

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US Sees Opportunity to Work With Russia on Cross-Border Aid in Syria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The United States sees an opportunity to work in partnership with Russia to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid to refugees in Syria, acting Assistant Secretary for Near East Asian Affairs in the US State Department Joey Hood said on Friday.

"We see here an opportunity to work constructively with Russia on this issue of getting humanitarian assistance to Syrians all across the country," Hood told reporters.

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US to Keep Small Number of Forces in Syria as IS Recruits New Fighters – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – The United States intends to maintain a small number of its military forces in northeastern Syria to support its local partners and fight the Islamic State (banned in Russia) that continues to exploit areas of instability to recruit new fighters, acting Director of the Office of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in the US State Department Patrick Worman said on Friday.

" [US] President [Joe] Biden has expressed support for maintaining our small number of US forces in northeast Syria to support local partners and prevent an ISIS resurgence," Worman said in a briefing. "It [IS] has worked to make its range of the networks more resilient and continue to exploit areas of local instability, and conflict to recruit and train new generations of terrorist fighters."

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'Dragon Man' Skull Preserved in China May Write New Chapter in Human Evolution - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The discovery of a fossilized "Dragon Man" skull in China may add new variant species to the human family tree, US media reported on Friday. A worker in China who uncovered the fossil then hid it in a well for 85 years, the New York Times said.

The well-preserved skullcap was uncovered in the Chinese city of Harbin and has been dated to between 138,000 and 309,000 years ago by geochemical analysis, CNN reported. It exhibits primitive features including a broad nose, a low brow and braincase, with others like modern humans such as flat and delicate cheekbones, the report said.

Scientists have concluded that the skullcap probably belonged to a 50-year-old man and also had other modern human-like features such as large eye sockets, big teeth and a brain similar in size to modern people, the report added.

Researchers have called it Homo longi, after Heilongjiang, or Black Dragon River, the province where it was found, report said.

Scientists now plan to try and extract ancient proteins or DNA from the cranium and study its interior using CT scans, the report added.

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Blinken, Counterparts to Discuss Efforts to Counter IS in Africa, Mideast - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and coalition partners will discuss efforts to counter the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in Africa, Iraq and Syria, acting Director of the Office of the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State, Patrick Worman, said on Friday.

"During our meeting in Rome, we will discuss key objectives in our continued efforts. At this meeting, ministers will discuss ways to sustain pressure on Iraq and Syria and counter ISIS networks globally, including in Africa," Worman said during a telephone briefing.

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Justice Dept. Sues US State of Georgia Over Voting Rights Restrictions - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is suing the state of Georgia over an act passed and signed into law in March that allegedly violates the 1965 Voting Act because it limits the voting rights of African-Americans, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Friday.

"Today the Department of Justice is suing the state of Georgia," Garland said. "Our complaint [challenges] recent changes to Georgia's election laws."

The law was passed by both chambers of the Republican-controlled Georgia legislature in March and was then signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp. The Justice Department charges that the law is discriminatory in seeking to make voting much more difficult for African-Americans in the state.

"Today I announced the [Civil Rights] division has found it necessary to file suit against the state of Georgia. ...Georgia's recent law Violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act," Assistant Attorney General Kristin Clark who heads the Civil Rights Division said. "We looked carefully at the Georgia law and determined there is an important federal interest to protect here."

The bill was three pages long when it was approved by Georgia's lower chamber but suddenly expanded to 90 pages when it was hurriedly passed by the state Senate and then immediately signed into law by the governor the same day, Clark said.

At least three other Republican-controlled states - Arizona, Iowa and Florida - have also passed similar laws while Pennsylvania and Texas are considering such measures. Merrick said the federal government might take legal action against them too.

"We are scrutinizing new laws that seek to curb voter access and when we see violations of federal law, we will act," he said.

The Justice Department's action against Georgia came only days after a united block of Republicans in the Senate blocked and killed a federal bill supported by the Biden

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Canada Designates 2 Far-Right Groups, Islamic State Offshoot as Terrorists - Minister

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has designated three groups and an individual as terrorist entities among which are two far-right collectives and an Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) offshoot in Africa, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said on Friday.

"Today, we are announcing the addition of four new entities - three groups and one individual - to the list of terrorist entities under the Criminal Code [of Canada]," Blair said in a press briefing. The list includes the Three Percenters and Aryan Strikeforce far-right groups active across North America, the Islamic State in the Democratic Republic of Congo and US neo-Nazi James Mason.

The Three Percenters, who gained notoriety for their role in the January 6 US Capitol unrest and the plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, dissolved in February, while the Aryan Strikeforce is considered to be in decline following the arrest of most of its leaders. Blair, however, said that both groups have chapters in Canada and they continue to pose a threat to national security. Canada is monitoring other hate groups and are tracking far-right efforts to integrate in the country's armed forces and law enforcement agencies, Blair added. In February, the Canadian government designated 13 groups as terrorist entities among which were far-right collectives the Proud Boys and the Atomwaffen Division, in an effort to clamp down on right-wing extremists, who according to the Canadian officials, pose a present and serious threat to Canada's national security.

The designation will allow Canadian authorities to pursue these entities through legal processes, conduct surveillance and curtail funding to the groups, Blair said.

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US Aircraft Carrier Transferred From Japan to Support Afghanistan Withdrawal – Reports

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – The US aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan has been relocated from Japan to the Arabian Sea to support the ongoing withdrawal of the military from

Afghanistan, the US Naval Institute (USNI), an independent military news forum, reported on Friday.

The USS Ronald Reagan had only finished its drills with the Indian Navy and will be taking place of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower strike group that has been operating in the region since April, USNI reported.

The last time a US aircraft carrier was moved from Japan to the Middle East was during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 when the now-decommissioned USS Kitty Hawk carrier was routed to the region.

The decision to relocate a US Navy carrier to the Middle East comes amid the reports of increasing Taliban attacks against Afghan government forces as the US is in the midst of its military being withdrawn from Afghanistan, which is expected to be completed before September 11.

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ICAO Did Not Get Full Answers in Ryanair Incident, Has Yet to Begin Probe - Russian Envoy
WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has not gotten full answers to the raised questions about the Ryanair airplane incident and is yet to the matter, Russian envoy to ICAO Sergey Gudkov told Sputnik.

"The answers to the raised questions have not yet been received in full and the commission has not yet begun an investigation. After receiving answers to the questions posed, the commission will proceed with an investigation. The final report of the Investigative Commission will be presented to the Council Members at the 224 Fall ICAO Council Session," Gudkov said.

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ICAO Forms Investigative Panel on Ryanair Incident, Determines Questions - Russian Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has formed an investigative panel into the Ryanair incident and has determined and sent several countries the questions in this regard, Russia's representative to the organization told Sputnik.

"The working document presented to the ICAO Council Members outlined the state of affairs on the investigation of this incident, namely: an Investigative Commission was formed; a range of questions to be answered has been determined; questions were sent to a number of countries on this matter," Gudkov said.

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Russia Did Not Participate in Preparing ICAO Preliminary Report on Ryanair Incident- Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Russia did not take part in preparing the preliminary report by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) into the Ryanair airplane incident, Russian envoy to ICAO Sergey Gudkov told Sputnik.

"The Russian Federation did not participate in the preparation of this report," Gudkov said.

6/25/2021 11:13:00 AM -04:00

RUSSIAN REPRESENTATIVE TO ICAO TO SPUTNIK ON RYANAIR INCIDENT WORKING PAPER UPDATE: QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN DETERMINED, SENT TO SEVERAL NATIONS
Sputnik

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UN Syria Envoy Pedersen Says to Visit Moscow Soon, Hold Talks With Russia, Iran, Turkey
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Canada Designates 2 Far-Right Groups, IS Offshoot, 1 Person as Terrorists – Minister

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Biden to Address Situation With Collapsed Building in Miami on Friday - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is expected to address the issue concerning the collapsed building near Miami, Florida, later on Friday as the search for survivors continues, CNN reported citing an unnamed White House official.

The official said there are no immediate plans for the president to travel to Florida.

"We will stay in touch with the officials on the ground and determine if and when that [travel] would be appropriate - current focus is on, and should be on, rescue and recovery," the official said.

On Thursday morning, a condominium building in Surfside near Miami partially collapsed. The authorities have said it remains unknown how many occupants were in the building when it collapsed and continue searching for survivors.

The first lady of Paraguay, Silvana Lopez Moreira, is currently visiting in Florida given that her sister and the latter's family are assumed to be among six Paraguayans who are unaccounted for after the building collapse, the report said.

Miami-Dade County head Daniella Levine Cava confirmed the number of dead in the incident has increased to four and the number of unaccounted for has increased to 159.